

DOSSIER

SERBI NETSANET

**A PERSONAL TESTIMONY
FROM A COMBATANT
IN THE TIGRAY DEFENSE FORCES**

This text tells the story of a young man's experience as a combatant in the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) during the Ethio-Tigray war. It documents the fighting and describes the suffering and privation experienced by fighters and civilians alike from a subjective, rarely publicised point of view. It also sheds light on the Tigray internal political crisis and reveals its connection to the everyday course of the conflict. The text has been partially anonymised, and any features we felt might be too detailed have been rephrased in square brackets.

Based on his scattered notes, a sociology graduate from university narrates his experience as a combatant in the ranks of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).

His report, written in early 2023, describes the suffering and privation, and depicts the extent of the trauma experienced by the 250,000 TDF combatants, as well as by the population as a whole. It underlines the incomprehension and indignation of the young combatants as they faced discretionary disciplinary practices and ambivalent relationships with civilians. The critical significance of this story lies in its pragmatic internal vision of a conflict experienced from below. It distances itself from the partisan, polarised interpretations many people have attributed to the war, and yet it remains highly political.

The critical attitudes that are widely shared among mobilised young people today embrace the internal political crisis at play in Tigray, which has been reinforced by the conflict. The author's unusual career, which he describes at the beginning of his report, includes a range of connected roles. As a student, battalion commander and former member of the intelligence services, he partly shared the positions of the high command, which was politically close to the TPLF, while on the other hand, as the young son of a peasant who suffered greatly from the war, he expresses the frustration and anger of a young man who no longer recognises himself in the TPLF's pan-Ethiopian ambitions and supports a Tigrayan political opposition movement that favours independence for Tigray. Ironically, the TPLF, which led Tigray's defence forces in their fight against the Ethiopian army, was a proponent of keeping the region within Ethiopia for as long as the State remains ethno-federal.

To balance the political positions that emerge here, however, we must bear in mind that he reconstructed the events he describes at the end of the war, at a time when public

SHOUT
SHARE IT



opinion was holding TPLF leaders – whether acting as politicians or TDF commanders – accountable for their poor management of a conflict they eventually lost.

The author's testimony traces the two main phases of the conflict. The first is the period during which the Tigray forces were routed by the joint forces of the Ethiopian Federal Army (ENDF), the Eritrean army (Shaabia in the text) and the Amhara armed groups (the fannu militias and the Amhara Special Forces). The narrator then travels to the Eritrean border and into central Tigray. The second stage of the conflict begins with the recapture of Mekelle, the regional capital, by the TDF and their deployment into the neighbouring Amhara National Regional State. The text begins with a finely detailed narrative, and then moves on to more general observations about the course of the war, with the shorter final sections depicting the political economy of the conflict.

The text has been partially anonymised, including by masking the precise locations and the many details that would have made it possible to identify the battalions involved. Proper nouns have been replaced by initials, and features we felt were too detailed have been rephrased in square brackets.

My name is Serbi Netsanet, and I am twenty-eight years old. I was born in Raya in Southern Tigray [at the border of the Amhara Region] into a family of farmers. Like many other Tigrayans, I grew up keeping cattle and helping my family, but I also received a good education, and I have an MA in sociology from an Ethiopian University. I've long dreamed of being a well-known intellectual in a position to improve the living conditions of rural households like mine. Unfortunately, I didn't go on to work at a university or a research centre. Instead, I found myself working in Ethiopia's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). Following the outbreak of the military conflict between the federal government of Ethiopia and the Tigray regional leadership, I witnessed serious abuses and atrocities in my area that led me to join the TDF. I was a member of the TDF on the western front from February 20, 2021, to October 21, 2022. During the summer of 2023 I was given the opportunity to write down and share my experiences of the war. I have crafted this testimony from observations I noted down during the war – at least the ones I have been able to keep – and from my own recollections.

MY BRIEF STAY WITH THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY SERVICE

When I first joined the security service, I was trained at the Kinfe Institute of National Security and Strategic Studies (KINSS) by General A, Commissioner-General D and other senior intelligence experts. I was among the first batch of trainees to be trained under the Prosperity Party-led government. The graduation

ceremony was held at the Arat Kilo¹ National Palace, and was attended by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who made the closing remarks. During the celebration, Abiy said “You, the graduate intelligence officers, are servants of Ethiopia and Ethiopia’s national interest. You are no longer servants of political parties, and you aren’t servants of mine.” He shook hands with almost all of us. Shortly thereafter, I was assigned to be a junior intelligence officer in the Main Department for Internal Security. Most Tigrayans were placed in the Internal and foreign security services. Not one was sent to the analysis unit. I served in Tigray for a year, after which I returned to the NISS’s Addis Ababa head office, in the media and public relations directorate. I was then appointed as news coordinator at [a radio station].

The head of media and public relations, Mr. D, a close friend of Daniel Kibret², who was well known for his hatred of the TPLF,³ caused me problems from the very beginning because I am Tigrayan. When I went to Addis Ababa, the political atmosphere was toxic. The media, social activists, politicians and even ordinary citizens were all talking politics, and hatred of Tigrayans was in full swing, with the main themes being things like “twenty-seven years of darkness” (referring to the years the TPLF-EPRDF ruled Ethiopia), “daytime hyenas”, “weeds” etc.⁴. During that time I would describe myself as “*Rayan*” [from Raya, an area close to Amhara in the south of Tigray] to escape these labels. At the time, being Tigrayan was viewed as evil, and it was not possible to express political views freely. In principle, the NISS was supposed to be non-partisan, but in practical terms it became an ardent ally of the Prosperity Party.

One day, I was driving from the NISS head office to [another broadcasting station] with Mr. D. and the radio in his car played a Tigrigna song by Solomon Haile. Mr. D. said he liked Solomon Haile because he hails from Agame, a zone in Tigray that was supposedly disliked by TPLF leaders, like the other zones of Wolqayt and Raya that are claimed as parts of their region by Amhara nationalists. I didn’t want to remain silent, and I said, “Mr. D, I was born in Raya, and I did my master’s thesis in Raya. I’ve never ever met a Rayan who claims that Raya belongs to Amhara. This is an agenda that’s being circulated

1. In the northern and central part of Addis Ababa, where Menelik II’s palace was built and later occupied by all the rulers of Ethiopia.

2. Daniel Kibret is an Orthodox deacon and was one of Abiy Ahmed’s special advisors during the war. He gave several speeches calling for the genocide of Tigrayans. He was appointed as special advisor on social affairs to the Prime Minister with the rank of Minister in January 2023.

3. The Tigray People’s Liberation Front fought the military “*Derg*” regime between 1975 and 1991, and later ruled Ethiopia in the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front’s coalition.

4. These expressions were used by Abiy Ahmed after he took power, especially “daytime hyenas”, which he used several times to refer to the TPLF. The English word *junta* was used by Abiy Ahmed in a speech he gave on the first night of the war in Tigray, between November 3 and 4, 2020, when he called the TPLF a “greedy junta” (*sigibgib junta* in Amharic). The word “*junta*” was quickly adopted as a derogatory term to refer to Tigrayans.

on Facebook by people who live in Bahir-Dar and Woldiya⁵.” He said nothing, and ended the discussion.

While I was working at a private radio station as a news coordinator, correspondents came in with news items that were anti-Tigrayan and against TPLF content. I rejected this news because they had political affiliations, and told them on many occasions that the station was public, and not politically affiliated like ESAT⁶. “You should come with news that solves the existing social and economic problems and fosters interactions among Ethiopians,” I told them. “We aren’t supposed to broadcast politically affiliated content or sensitive political issues that might exacerbate social and political unrest among citizens.”

Later, Mr. D. began to employ his own loyal reporters who had no background in journalism or experience at salaries ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 Ethiopian Birr⁷. I complained about this illegal employment to the relevant managers. Repeated meetings were held on the issue, but I decided not to carry on in this way and went to the head of the NISS main office, Mr. B, who told me: “Serbi, this is none of your business. Focus on the news and radio alone.”

I stayed in this situation for a month, but things were deteriorating, and I told Mr. B. clearly that the station was operating against its own editorial policy. “If you don’t offer a timely solution I won’t work at this station any longer. I’d rather go back to Internal Security.” When I made my position clear, Mr. D. warned me to rethink my decision. I told him it was final. He agreed to write a letter to Internal Intelligence and Security on my behalf, but they immediately cut off the extra benefits of 2,500 Birr I was being paid. My salary was 3,200 birrs and I was paying 2,500 birrs in rent. After they cut the 2,500 Birr, I suffered a great deal. Imagine living in Addis Ababa with a salary of 3,200 birr for a whole month! A month later, Mr. B called me and told me that “His Honour Director-General D has decided to return me to the internal security,” but the letter to the Internal Security and the one I was given were quite different. The letter sent in secret to the Internal Security read “Serbi is incapable of working with us. He failed to perform all the duties assigned to him.”

Honestly speaking, I was tired of the regime. I hated the Abiy leadership, which had anchored its power around a blind hatred of Tigrayans and the TPLF, and I officially resigned from the NISS in July 2020.

5. Bahir Dar is the administrative capital of the Amhara region. Woldiya is another large town in the Amhara region, closer to Raya.

6. Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio is a former opposition media company headquartered in the United States. Some members of its team returned to Ethiopia in 2018 and have been closely affiliated with the ruling Prosperity Party since that time.

7. To make a comparison, a person with a Master’s degree working at a university was earning 11,000 ETB at the time.

On July 20, 2020, I travelled to Mekelle. Mr. B, the coordinator of the the Department for Tigray, Afar and Amhara Regions called me:

“Serbi, come back to Addis Ababa within two days. You should take care of yourself and the safety of your family. Don’t play a game you can’t win. They (TPLFs) can’t protect you and your family. I’m giving you brotherly advice.”

I told him it was impossible to move from one place to another because of the restrictions following the COVID-19 outbreak. There was no transport. All the roads were blocked. He replied that it was not his concern, and he never called me again.

THE NORTHERN COMMAND OPERATION

When the Tigray regional government rejected the newly-appointed Northern Command⁸ leaders and forced them to return to Addis Ababa, the federal government responded by attempting to arrest the Tigray leadership, in particular its President, Debretsion Gebremichael. In February 2020, the government sent a special commando unit to assassinate the President, but it was unsuccessful because the Special Forces of the Tigray Region prevented the attempt. After the failed assassination, rumours spread about it on social media. This was when I realised that war was inevitable, and I made myself a promise to contribute what I could.

At around midnight on November 3rd, 2020, there was heavy fighting in Western Tigray, but the war on the southern front had not yet begun. A few days later, the feared war broke out on the Raya front. I was on my way to Raya at the time, and when I reached my parents’ home I suddenly fell sick. Families and relatives took me to Maychew Hospital [in the capital of Southern Tigray]. I spent days in bed. Comrades at the battlefield sent me news that the Tigray Special Forces (TSF⁹) were defending their base at Beri Teklay, which was one of the strategic military locations along the Raya front. After some days, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) broke the TSF’s stronghold in Beri Teklay, and three days later they took control of Mokhoni [a medium-sized town in Southern Tigray].

The ENDF, Amhara militants and other regional forces had more manpower and artillery than the TSF. The TSF beat a tactical retreat to the nearby hills and gorges of Wajarat. At the same time, many Ethiopian army soldiers accompanied

8. Stationed on the outskirts of Mekelle, the Northern Command was the largest of the four Commands of the Ethiopian Federal Army. The proximity to Eritrea, with which Ethiopia had been in a cold war stalemate for two decades, explains the importance of this Command, where large amounts of artillery weapons were kept.

9. The Tigray Special Forces are a regional militarised police force similar to the special forces formed in all the regions of Ethiopia in the 2010s.

by mechanised units were marching towards Grat-Kahsu, but the TSF stopped them from entering Korem Town [a strategic town in Southern Tigray, Raya, located on the main road to Addis Ababa]. The 21st Division, a well-trained unit of the ENDF, was marching across Wajarat with the aim of capturing Tigray's capital, Mekelle. In collaboration with Wajarat militias¹⁰, the TSF destroyed the 21st division at a place called Gereb-Agew. I had not fully recovered from my serious illness, but I went to the front to help comrades who were in a last-ditch struggle with the enemy.

The ENDF wanted to take control of Mekelle using human wave tactics and artillery. After two days of fighting, the ENDF were in control of the gorges and hills of Wajarat and were advancing toward Hiwane [a northern town in Raya]. For the TSF, leaving Hiwane to the ENDF meant allowing them to enter Mekelle. Our forces fought gallantly. At the entrance to Hiwane, I remember five newly recruited TSF members fighting around 50 ENDF soldiers. We only had AK-47 rifles and F1 bombs at the time. The Ethiopian government used air raids and drones, and we were unfamiliar with drone attacks. The heavy artillery the TSF had captured was targeted by drones and destroyed. They were all silenced. For the first time, I realised that we were losing to the ENDF and that Mekelle might fall under their control. Our units were fighting day and night with no rest or supplies. After the ENDF and its allies took over the nearby towns of Hiwane and Adi Gudem, our forces fell apart, and the chain of command collapsed. Rumours that the top military commanders were working with the PP and that our generals were using two military radios – one for the PP and the other for the TSF – and that they were working to finish us spreading like wildfire.

At the time, most of us were sure that Mekelle would fall under the control of the ENDF within days. But a few hours later, very surprisingly, we heard that the senior Ethiopian General Bacha Debele had been captured in Adigudem. Our soldiers all fired their guns in the air and the farmers voiced their happiness, but General Bacha had not actually been captured. The TSF's most senior political and military leadership decided not to continue fighting around Mekelle and left the town. The conventional war came to an end. Dimtsi Woyane, the TPLF channel, broadcast images of TPLF troops leaving Mekelle to launch a guerrilla war in the lowlands of Tembien¹¹. The ENDF then captured Mekelle, and like my comrades, I travelled back to my family in Raya, which took me two full days on foot.

10. In Ethiopia, every local administrative unit (*kebele*) has its own police force mainly made up of armed male citizens who are responsible for the security of their respective *kebeles*. They have to refer more serious offenses and crimes to the upper district (*woreda*) police.

11. Central Tigray. A major battlefield during the last war of liberation that resulted in the TPLF and its Eritrean allies conquering Addis Ababa and overthrowing the Derg regime.

THE BORA MASSACRE: "KILL EVERY MALE OVER SEVEN!"

On December 6, 2020, the ENDF seized control of Bora [near Maychew, the capital of Southern Tigray], where I had joined my younger brother, who was already hiding with relatives, to get away from our home, where the war had been terrible. The people of Bora left the town for nearby villages to save their lives. Mothers and fathers moved to the plateaus and caves of Bora, which the enemy would not be able to access easily, along with their cattle. The town was left deserted. The ENDF troops were probably shocked and wondered why the people had abandoned the town. Like other residents, I spent two weeks, day and night, in caves with my family and relatives. I had binoculars and was able to follow what the Ethiopian troops were doing in the town and nearby villages. I tried to organise and communicate with the militias and members of the TSF, but could not, as the militants had lost their faith in fighting. There were many TSF members hidden in rural communities. They had concealed their weapons and abandoned their uniforms to mix with the rural people. It was normal for farmers to offer them hospitality as they were considered to be necessary to defend Tigray, but some would let their children be caught rather than join the TSF. Nobody thought the war would last very long and consume so many children's lives.

On the morning of January 8, 2021, the Bora militias engaged the ENDF from the north and northwest. The militias were gaining a remarkable victory over the ENDF until 4:00 p.m., but then 40 ENDF military trucks quickly arrived to support the encircled ENDF in Bora town and began firing on civilians. I was at my distant relatives' house. One returned from outside and told us "Leave... leave... leave... they are killing males. They've killed Hadush" (their neighbour). I would have liked to escape with my brothers, but unfortunately they were not with me. Only one, D, was with me. Some hours later, Ethiopian soldiers approached the place where I had hidden with D. One of the soldiers gave an order on the military radio: "Hello, can you hear me? Kill every male over the age of seven" I was shocked. We hid behind a small stone wall. It was a nightmare. I heard shooting in nearby areas. I was easily able to recognise the sound of a gun when it was fired in the air or into a man's body, and I understood that they were shooting civilians. D was shivering.

Within an hour, over 170 male civilians had been executed. Sons were killed in front of their fathers and mothers. The Ethiopian troops ordered them not to bury their sons' bodies. Mothers were looking for and keeping the dead bodies of their offspring for days. Adults ran away randomly to save their lives. Some went to Agew, in the Amhara region. The Ethiopian troops continued shooting. We had no food and no clothes; we just moved to save our lives. We reached the highlands. I felt safe but the villages were burning. I didn't know where my father and brothers were. D was shocked, and yielded all night long. I didn't sleep. I spent the night looking at the burning villages. I lost all hope.

Only elderly and disabled people and individuals who couldn't walk were left in the town. Two days later, the Ethiopian army allowed the older women to bury the bodies. They collected them in two Isuzu trucks. Five people were buried in a single grave. No one was allowed to cry or show any sympathy. Days later, the graves began leaking and hyenas ate the bodies. My brother D. returned home, but I stayed on Mount Tsibet for three weeks hiding with relatives.

A REUNION WITH MY COMRADES

The federally-owned media were broadcasting:

"The junta betrayed the Northern Command, which has been in the service of protecting the Tigray region for three decades. Betrayal is in their blood. The government should continue the law enforcement measures. The junta is like blown flour in the air [an expression first used by the Prime Minister to denigrate ethnic Tigrayans]."¹²

The people had lost hope. Adults were searching for the whereabouts of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), which had been formed a couple of weeks earlier. On March 6, 2021, three TDF divisions from the south front suddenly arrived in Bora. I joined the A Division, Regiment 60. Hundreds of young men were joining. The surviving TDF divisions were recruiting fighters in the lowland areas (from the Saharti-Samre, Wajirat, Tembien, Bora Slewa, Neksege and Ofra *woredas*). On that day, the three divisions fought the Shaabia¹³ for hours. We left Bora hours later and spent four days in Neksege and travelled by night over the hills and gorges of May-Maedo. We slept during the day and travelled at night. We didn't spend a consecutive day and night in the same place.

March 10, midnight. We were travelling through the hills of May Maedo to a village called Becheka. The sky was dark. Lights of any kind and speaking loudly were absolutely forbidden because the enemy was nearby and might capture us. Comrade Gelebeda was walking behind me. I heard something fall. I thought it might be a stone. We paused to rest at around 3 a.m. I woke up early in the morning and Gelebeda was not with us. He joined us at midnight. He had a broken leg. I asked him where he had spent the whole night. "I fell in the hills. I decided to stay silent. If I yelled loudly the enemy might open fire on us. If I had to die, I decided to die alone."

We were travelling from May Maedo Becheka to Hashenge Lake. At 2:00 p.m., the ENDF began firing at us. A division led by General D responded, and the battle continued until eight o'clock in the evening. Hours later, our commander

12. Abiy Ahmed had publicly declared on a previous occasion: "Who do you want me to negotiate with? The TPLF has been crushed and has dispersed into the air, like flour!"

13. Shaabia is a derogatory nickname for the Eritrean army, after the name of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in Arabic: *Al-jabhat Ash-shaabia Ltahrir Irtrea*.

ordered us to retreat. In the morning, the fighting started again, supported on the ENDF's side by mechanised divisions and airstrikes, so we moved to the lowlands of Agew, next to Tigray [in Amhara]. Fortunately, while we were retreating, we found 5 ENDF deserters who gave us a report on the overall status of the ENDF. They walked with us for six hours, but later they grew weak, and the regiment commander ordered his guards to execute them during the night.

“YOU ARE SPYING ON US FOR THE PP [THE PROSPERITY PARTY]”

March 23, 2021. We found ourselves encircled in a difficult landscape. Abiy declared on television that the core strategic leadership of the TPLF was encircled and gave us 72 hours to surrender to the ENDF. There were senior political leaders with us. Everyone understood that we were surrounded.

At 07:00 p.m., it was beginning to get dark. TDF units began to move in a southeasterly direction. One comrade asked the regiment leader: “Where are we going? What is happening?” The regiment leader responded with a threat: “I will give you your reward”. On our way, we found a large river and I was unable to walk any further. I had lost all my strength. The regiment leader told me: “I know why you’re lagging behind. You’re spying on us for the PP. Unless you carry on moving I’ll kill you. No one will ask me for a reason. Move, idiot! ... Banda... traitor... We will show you who we are.”

I heard two outbreaks of gunfire on the way. I told myself I was here to defend my people. In the morning, we escaped the siege. We were all tired, hungry and thirsty. I tried to look for the comrade who had asked questions earlier. Kibrom, another comrade, told me: “Serbi ...please don’t tell anyone, but they killed him.” I recalled their threats, and was shocked. I began to think about where and when they were going to kill me. We rested under a large tree. The division commander spoke to us about the nature and aim of the struggle. “Today they’re hunting us but in the very near future we’re going to hunt them. Tigray will prevail¹⁴. We will retake our sovereign territory. We will take revenge on our historic and strategic enemies.” When he ended his speech, the commander asked, “Is there anyone here called Serbi Netsanet?” I was surprised. “Yes, here I am,” I replied. “Stay here. I need you badly” he said. Oh, was I shocked! “Where’s the AK47 you got from our dead comrade Berhe?”, he continued. “Where were you before?” “I was in the NISS, but when I noticed things were becoming rough I decided to leave, and I returned to Tigray to defend its people from the aggressors,” I told him. “That’s why I’m here with the TDF fighting the ENDF.” “Where did you hide the AK47 you got from our dead comrade Berhe?”, he insisted. I later

14. Language from Tigray military and political propaganda that was widely replicated on social media in Ethiopia and abroad.

realised that they had associated the repeated encirclement and siege with me. They thought I was spying on the TDF for the PP. "You're here to spy on us for the PP," he told me clearly. "That's why we're in a vicious circle and siege. No one can save you. Just tell me everything in detail. If you tell me about each and every mission you received from the PP I'll let you go back to where you want to go." I became disturbed, and assumed they were going to execute me during the night, as they had with my other comrade. I lost hope. He ordered his personal guards to follow me. A close friend of mine, Alem, told me: "Serbi, they don't trust you anymore. They're still talking about you. I wish you all the best. I can't do anything for you at this moment. Stay strong."

We were too far from our Tigrayan farmers' base, and the army couldn't stay in the lowlands of Agew like this with no supplies. We spread false information, pretending that units of the TDF were preparing a sudden attack on the ENDF around Seqota [the main town in the Agew area]¹⁵. This diverted the attention of the ENDF and the Amhara militants. The three well-equipped divisions of the TDF then travelled in secret to a small town called Xsata [on the main road leading to Mekelle] by night while the ENDF were digging trenches in Seqota.

We arrived in Xsata in the early morning, at around 6 o'clock. A small unit of militia and Amhara Special Forces started firing on us. Hours later, they left the area. I arrived at the health centre with my comrades. I found the health centre guards dead, but there was nutritious food like Plumpy'Nut and cookies and medical supplies inside. Our fighters broke the doors and windows, looted the health centre and took all the medical products. We soon found a USAID warehouse and opened it with F1 hand grenades. Our fighters took peas and oil, and burned all the aid peas and oil we couldn't carry. The fighters took over the shops in the town and took all the new clothes, shoes, money and honey from the farmers. No one tried to stop them. The division commanders focused on capturing munitions.

SONS OF THE DERG¹⁶

We began our journey at around 2 p.m. on March 26, following the main road between Mekelle and Seqota. We found heavy construction trucks and machinery, and the fighters burned all of them with bombs and guns. At 8:00 p.m., we arrived in a small village called Merkato¹⁷. I and some other comrades

15. Seqota is the administrative center of the Wag Himra (Agew) zone in the Amhara Region.

16. The Derg ["committee" in Amharic, "Dergi" in Tigrigna] was the military regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. It was extremely violent, and increased state centralisation and forbade the expression of ethnic diversity, although it recognised it. It was toppled in 1991 by a coalition of armed groups led by the TPLF.

17. Merkato is a small village on the Mekelle to Seqota road.

went to a farmer's house. I begged him in the Agew language to give us water. I don't understand very much of this language. The farmer panicked, and I tried to convince him. "Don't be afraid of us, nothing will happen to you," I told him. "Our hostility is only toward the PP-led government, not to the oppressed people of Ethiopia. We don't need to cause others the same problems our people are having." The farmer gave us three and a half litres of milk instead of the water we had asked for.

The farmers talked to us.

"The [local administration¹⁸] told us at Saint Mary's church that the Woyane [a widespread popular nickname for the TPLF¹⁹] are coming to destroy you, to take revenge, to take your personal property and government property, to rape your girls, to burn your churches and disarm you. They told us to fight the Junta mercilessly, and when the people heard the guns, they left the village immediately to hide and escape from this disaster. On top of this, the militias were telling us that the Woyane are destroying aid stocks, burning road machines and killing civilians, so everyone left the village hours ago, before you arrived."

"If we make the same mistake that happened to our people, why are we fighting?" I asked my fellow TDF fighters.

"Do you think we'll win against the ENDF and the Amhara militants? If we cause problems for ordinary farmers like the ENDF did to our people, we'll never win. Yes, these people speak Amharic, but anyone who speaks Amharic isn't the enemy anymore. These people are victims of the PP, exactly like our people."

There was a tendency among the fighters to believe that anyone who spoke Amharic was connected to the PP. With this understanding in their minds, they insulted the farmers of Amhara, calling them "Sons of the Derg".

On March 27, we walked for the whole night in a northeasterly direction, following the main road, which was under construction. We travelled for at least a week. The landscape was flat, and very dry. There was no water, and there were only a few scattered villages. We were suffering from a shortage of food and water. After a very difficult all-day journey, we reached a place called Worqe Dino. Weeks later, we arrived at a large river. Our regiment commander ordered us to rest and wash. Some of the fighters were washing, some were sleeping, and some were eating Plumpy'Nut.

18. The text refers to the chairperson of the *kebele* [local administrative unit] and the *wereda* [district] administrators.

19. In Amharic, *Woyane* is the – often derogatory – nickname given to the TPLF. It comes from the party's name in Tigrigna, which is *Hizbawi Woyane Harnet Tigray*. *Woyane* means revolt in Tigrigna, and refers to the First *Woyane*, the 1943 uprising against Haile Selassie's centralised government. The First *Woyane* saw the bombing of Mekelle by the British Royal Air Force, which is still a traumatic event in Tigrayan popular consciousness. The second *woyane* refers to the 17 years of armed struggle by the TPLF.

I heard some exchanges of gunshots from nearby. The regiment commander ordered us to get ready. "11 Shaabia [Eritrean] infantry divisions and a mechanised division have encircled us as they did days ago," he told us. I was in bad physical shape from the long journey. I had been travelling non-stop for more than 63 hours, but there was firing from all directions and the sounds were getting closer and closer. We were moving quickly to take good ground for our defence. I was with M. and Hadush. Hadush told us: "Dear comrades, I may die in this war. Please take care of my mother and beloved Tigray", and he gave me his silver necklace. We lost control of the battle. M. and I stayed with the health unit to help our wounded comrades. I was hit by a fragment of mortar. Hadush went off with his comrades. The fighting continued until 4:30 p.m., when we heard news that the enemy was retreating in a disorganised fashion. An hour later, we received an order to leave the area, but I couldn't control my body and was unable to walk. With the help of M., I moved on slowly. After walking for ten minutes, I saw Hadush's body among the dead Eritrean soldiers. Hadush had left us forever, and would never return. It was common to lose comrades on every battlefield, but I cried from my very heart.

I AM YOUR BOSS!

One thing I noticed in this war is that people who are in the position of regiment commanders and above are viewed as lords. There is a crystal-clear patron-client relationship among the infantry and commanders. Colonel W was a 76-year-old military intelligence commander on the western front. He met R, who was a 23 years old woman, in a small town and brought her into the intelligence unit by promising to give her a house, a car and other luxurious things after the victory. She didn't have any formal military training, but he told us she was his operator, even though I'd never seen her using a radio.

It was impossible to eat our breakfast, lunch and dinner when she was there. I couldn't talk loudly in front of her. We used to fetch water and collect firewood to prepare food, but the guards always let her off. If they didn't, they knew it would be seen as an irresistible insult. If I discussed things with her in the morning, I would be criticised by the team for not respecting our female comrades. On July 28, 2021, R and I were in a hotel in Shire talking about various political and military issues. "R you are too young. Every fighter is here to give their life," I told her, "but I am very sorry to tell you that the way you treat fighters is very wrong and inhuman. Every fighter fears and hates you; it isn't good for your name and future life. You should have a friendly relationship with your comrades." "Serbi, I don't care how the others might react," R replied. "The only thing that concerns me at this moment is to ensure my safety and comfort. Personally, I respect you. You're an educated person, but you come up with this

senseless idea. I don't need this kind of nonsense from you. Whether you believe it or not, I'm your boss!"

The leaders use their position to convince female fighters to give them favours. Being a guard, an operator or a member of generals' and colonels' human resources staff is seen as a blessing. Freedom fighters became servants of their commanders and some girls gave up their virginity to become staff members and save their lives by not going into the battlefield. The advantages of being a member of staff are having food and water on time, getting a relatively good shelter, staying fairly safe and rested and having access to supplies first, before the infantrymen. Taking all these factors into account, everyone prefers to be a member of staff.

BETRAYAL OF THE TPLF

After the victorious Siyoum campaign²⁰, large numbers of adult fighters joined the TDF, which organised a mobile training programme. It only lasted a few days and focused on how to repair guns and hit targets. Political lecturers taught the trainees that the main aim of the armed struggle was to take revenge on the allied enemy and ensure the independence of Tigray. Some trainees with university degrees predicted: "If the goal of this struggle is Tigray independence, everyone will join it. But if it's to return to Addis Ababa, it'll be hard, and no one will be happy."

New tensions arose among the fighters, and the educated members of the TDF raised some critical questions. Seminars and discussions were conducted among TDF staff members during the fighting. The questions included how far the TPLF was hijacking the TDF struggle, the importance of our advance to Addis Ababa and whether Western Tigray was still under the control of Amhara. Senior commanders including M and F replied: "We know what's best for our people. Military science is different from university science."

I personally know a father with three sons. He is a member of the TPLF and took part in the 17-year armed liberation struggle²¹. One morning after sports he told me:

"Serbi, those (TPLF) leaders are stagnant. They're only concerned about the safety of their families, relatives and businesses. Open your eyes, my son! Our commander's daughter works for an international NGO. She's paid 30,000 ETB a month. You're as educated as her but you're using an AK-47 instead of a laptop. And no one is entitled to ask him why his

20. An operation named after Seyoum Mesfin, a founding member of the TPLF and long-time member of the Central Committee who was Ethiopia's Minister of Foreign Affairs for almost two decades. He was arrested and killed in January 2021. Operation Seyoum Mesfin was carried out in Central Tigray in February 2021. It inflicted heavy losses on the ENDF and resulted in a victory for the TGF.

21. The 17-year armed struggle that brought the TPLF/EPRDF to power in 1991.

daughter hasn't joined the TDF. She's the daughter of a general, of an army commander. This is a common thing not only among the sons and daughters of TDF generals, but also among the TPLF leaders. I'm not telling you this to make you leave the struggle but to make you aware of the real nature of our political and military leaders."

The next day, as we were walking to the café, he said:

"Serbi, you're a young scholar, you should write our history. Record it. Today you're fighting in the trenches at the front, but after our victory you'll be nothing for them. Tomorrow they're going to employ their families and relatives in EFFORT²². Look at EFFORT. It's an economic giant and one of the most profitable companies in Ethiopia. But have you seen our people benefiting from it? They only employ their relatives, and loyal ones. Betrayal's in their blood, my son. They use the term Tigrayan nationalism to convince innocent people like you, but in practice they aren't nationalists. They're pro-Ethiopia. Now they use the term Tigrayan nationalism at every conference and meeting and training programme, but trust me, son, they'll forget all about it when we're in control of Addis Ababa."

In the minds of the new generation of Tigray, Ethiopia is no more than a neighbour of the supposedly independent Tigray.

The fate of Tigray has still not been determined, and remains debatable. The new generation is demanding independence while the TPLF's old guard and elders want to stay in the federation with Ethiopia. When we were in the lowlands of Tembien they promised us that the end goal of the struggle would be to ensure Tigray's independence, but when we approached Addis Ababa, they stated clearly that independence would not be good for us, and that independence requires time and we should be wise.

"WE DON'T HAVE A SHORTAGE OF INTELLECTUALS"

When the campaign of Tigrayan mothers to liberate Tselemti and advance to Gonder began,²³ two corps from the western front were sent to the Adi Arkay-Gonder front. Some units stayed in Adiyabo just to deter Shaabia from re-entering Tigray. I was assigned to another intelligence unit and had the opportunity to meet some of the top commanders of the army and divisions.

On July 21, 2021, infantry divisions were mobilised to liberate Tselemti. The Tekeze River²⁴ was high and not easy to cross. Our fighters were under pressure

22. The TPLF-affiliated conglomerate comprising the biggest enterprises in Ethiopia. EFFORT was the spearhead of the TPLF's "developmental state". See S. Vaughan and Mesfin Gebremichael, "Rethinking business and politics in Ethiopia: The role of EFFORT, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray", *Research Report*, n° 2, Africa Power and Politics Programme, London, Overseas Development Institute, 2011.

23. A campaign that began in July 2021.

24. One of the largest rivers in Northern Ethiopia, it is very hard to cross during the rainy season, which lasts from late June to September. It crosses Tigray but is considered by Amhara nationalists to be the historical boundary between Amhara and Tigray.

to get there within the planned time. We lost seven armed fighters while we were crossing the river. The coordinator immediately reported this to the division leader. "With their weapons?" he asked, "Yes", replied the coordinator. "What were you doing?" The commander shouted, "We're not short of fighters! Don't you know we're short of weapons? This mustn't happen again. Pay proper attention to keeping our weapons safe and share my message to everyone now." All the fighters were shocked by the commander's arrogant and irresponsible words. On August 29, 2021, there was a similar incident while we were crossing the Zarema River²⁵, when we lost six fighters and their guns. The commander was very angry about the loss of the guns, but not the fighters. I realised that military leaders and the rules of war care more about military equipment than fighters.

On August 31, 2021, four infantry divisions with support from the Mekelle mechanised division were advancing via Adi-Arkay/Bere-Maryam/Zarema to North Gonder in the Amhara region. The fighting became difficult because the ENDF and Amhara forces defended well and chased us from the mountains of North Gonder. We were also short of supplies because we were a long way from our Shire base and the weather conditions were very harsh. Three wounded comrades died because of the cold.

I was with a division commander. "Our army is made up of scholars, engineers, and medical professionals," I told him.

"We're losing these potential assets for the future reconstruction of Tigray in this deadly war. If we lose this intellectual power during the war our future will be difficult. We should save our skilled manpower as soon as we can as we may need them in the future, and they may not be here. The Ethiopian government and the Amhara are using farmers, soldiers with no more than an 8th-grade education. The Tigray government should consider this."

"Listen, we don't have a shortage of scholars," he replied laughing.

"We don't have a shortage of skilled manpower. At the beginning of the 17-year armed struggle, half the infantrymen were university and high school students. Meles²⁶ was a scholar. Aregawi and Debretsion²⁷ were scholars. Even Siyum and Abay²⁸ were well-known scholars. Even if we were to face a shortage of trained and skilled people we could import them from Europe and America. Our concern for now is how to break through the PP's

25. A smaller river further south that crosses hard terrain and is fast-flowing during the rainy season.
26. Meles Zenawi, the former Prime Minister of Ethiopia from 1991 to 2012, who joined the TPLF in the very early days of the party.

27. Aregawi Berhe was among the founding members of the TPLF who left the party in the mid-1980s. He subsequently obtained a PhD. He has published his dissertation. Aregawi Berhe, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, Ideology, and Mobilization in Ethiopia*, Los Angeles, Tsehai Publishers, 2009. Debretsion Gebremichael was a telecommunications and intelligence officer during the struggle and later obtained a PhD. He occupied ministerial and other high-ranking positions in the EPRDF Party-State.

28. Seyoum Mesfin and Abay Tsehaye are founding members of the TPLF. Both had ministerial positions in the 1990s and 2000s.

trenches, how to control Gonder. Let me tell you, for me one Master's degree graduate and one farmer are the same thing for Tigray in this struggle."

M. and R. were university graduates in law and engineering respectively. They were infantrymen in Corps 101, later Army 11. I had a good relationship with both of them, and we sometimes discussed the future fate of Tigray. "The TDF's life-or-death struggle has been hijacked," M. observed. "Our politicians are thinking about a comfortable life in Addis Ababa."

BEATING YOUR COMRADE IS EASY

Things weren't going to plan on the Gonder front²⁹. The idea had been to control the strategic town of Gonder and cut the lines of the Eritrean army and the ENDF in Humera. Because of weaknesses in our military leadership, a difficult landscape, bad weather conditions and a shortage of supplies, however, our forces retreated from the highlands of Gonder to the lowlands of Zarema and Chew-Ber. Imagine a one-week battle with no supplies of food. The senior military leaders on the western front, General Migbey and other top commanders, also ordered us not to use food from farmers without their consent. They passed an order to execute any fighter who coerced farmers into providing food. The farmers wouldn't cooperate with us, which left us with only one option: to eat sprouted potatoes for days. The leaders also ordered us not to burn the enemy tanks and ZU-23s that were firing at us. They ordered us to capture the equipment by hand. Things got out of control and about five fighters killed themselves. The army then ordered us to retreat in an organised fashion.

On September 10, 2021, a unit with around 80 fighters arrived in Chew Ber. They were all tired and hungry. They were asked where they were coming from and going to, as their comrades were still fighting the enemy. K said "I beg you in the name of the martyrs. If you need food, water and rest, there is food and water. If you need rest you can rest here." But they didn't listen to K and me and carried on walking along the road to meet General Migbey. One of our leaders saw the whole thing, got in his car and ordered his guards to prevent the fighters from moving to Tselemti. They stopped the unit and beat the fighters with their guns and used sticks on the coordinators, and punched them. The coordinators were bleeding and crying. One shouted: "I'm fighting the enemy but it's you, comrade, who is actually attacking me. You can kill me. Congratulations, keep on beating me. Beating your comrade is easy. The difficult thing is to fight the enemy in the hills. Time will judge us." After three hours the unit was forced to return to the battle.

29. A major town on the northern border of Amhara.

There is one principle I don't support any more during wartime, that you can't ask why things are happening and where we are going and that you can't ask for medicine, shoes or clothes. The leaders always reply "Your fathers and forefathers fought the enemy eating one loaf of bread for days. There is no comfort in war."

"OUR ENEMY IS NOT THE TDF, IT IS THE FANNO"

On September 10, 2021, all our divisions successfully retreated from the hills of north Gonder to Chew Ber. I stayed in Chew Ber for some days, and had the chance to talk to Amhara farmers, girls and adults. The girls sold coffee and *tella*³⁰ to the TDF. One day, I met Ato Damtie, an 83-year-old man, while he was tending his sheep. I invited him to drink *tella* with me, and asked him to tell me about their perceptions of the TDF: "My son," he told me, "after you crossed the Tekezze River, the *fanno*³¹ told us 'the Tigrayans are coming to incorporate Adi-Arkay into Tigray. They are coming to rape our girls. They are coming to make us part of Tigray. They are coming to slaughter us. They are coming to loot our villages and take all our property'. We've seen our leader Agegnehu Teshager speaking on television, claiming that Tigray is the enemy of all Ethiopians, the enemy of Amhara and Afar. After you took control of Adi-Arkay and Bere-Mariam all the residents left the village. But I don't agree with their idea. I know what your fathers did during the 17 years of armed struggle against the Derg. They may label me a traitor, an agent of the Junta, but I don't care about their senseless vilification."

From that time on, the old man visited me in the morning and for lunch. I gave him my rations. One morning, he said "My son, I'm suffering from the cold. If you have any extra blankets can you please give me one?" I gave him a used blanket and a military field jacket. He continued:

"Our enemy is not the Tigray army, our enemy is our self-described freedom fighters, the *fanno*. You didn't take our cattle, sheep and goats. The *fanno* forced us to give up our sheep, cereals, and money every month. The Tigray soldiers gave us food from their rations. Your midwifery staff helped our women and daughters. The Tigray army nurses treated us and gave us medicine. You've given me a blanket and a jacket. Our enemy is the *fanno*. I've never seen or heard about any Tigray soldiers raping girls. God bless you, my son. After Abiy came to power, Ethiopia became a war-torn state. Ethiopia became unstable. Ethiopia was at peace during Meles. There was full peace. We walked freely with no fear at that time. There was credit. But this Abiy has brought a curse to Ethiopia."

30. *Tella* is a traditional locally brewed beer.

31. *Fanno* refers to the armed group that historically fought and plundered alongside the imperial armies in Ethiopia. The word has powerful nationalist overtones and has been appropriated by armed groups who claim to represent Amhara interests. They were prominent during the war in Tigray.

Despite what the old Amhara man had seen, however, some irresponsible Tigrayan fighters did rape girls and force farmers to give them food and money, but most of the fighters who committed rape were punished.

“WHAT IF AN INFANTRYMAN SELLS A GUN?” I ASKED MYSELF

During the siege in 2021-22, I saw and heard about certain military leaders working as contrabandists. I know of some who exchanged money, and trafficked medicine, salt, oil, petroleum, weapons and gold. They were also engaged in illegal money exchanges in Adiyabo, Yechila, Edaga Hamus, Abala Afar and Alamata. They charged a 50-55% commission because they were military leaders!

On their way back from North Shewa and Debre Birhan, some senior military leaders were busy transporting household items, machinery, money, flour, electronics and other expensive commodities in military trucks from Kombolcha Industry Park to Mekelle. While they were transporting money and commodities to their families, the infantrymen were travelling from North Shewa to Alamata on foot.

Once, we were in A-N, and the H division commander sold two guns to a man. I reported it to his senior officer. “This isn’t a pressing issue for me,” he replied. “It would have been interesting if you could have brought me information about *Shaabia* and the PP army.” The corps intelligence chief also sold a gun and was demoted to battalion commander. In the military world, this is a very silly punishment. I asked myself what would happen if an infantryman sold a gun.

I know war is not pleasant, but during the Tigray siege in 2022, there were some individuals who were flourishing. The siege brought blessings to some leaders but curses for most of us. They profited from the war by smuggling with illegal merchants, providing them with the legal coverage they needed. During the siege, a number of pharmacies opened. Drugs were accessible at private pharmacies when the government health centres were severely short of medicines. Pregnant and lactating mothers, infants, children and wounded civilians died because of this shortage. The government had plenty of information about the private pharmacies and the stocks of medical supplies being kept in warehouses. Very surprisingly, it didn’t take any visible measures. The private pharmacies set up during the siege made significant profits, and had probably paid bribes to military leaders.

Despite the bloody war, a number of Eritreans crossed the Tigray border every day to escape forced conscription and national service. Especially through the A front and after the Pretoria Agreement³², Eritrean migrants crossed the border with the help of human smugglers and some, but not all, TDF leaders.

32. On Nov 2, 2022, the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray regional authorities signed a Cessation of Hostilities agreement under the tutelage of the African Union and the USA.

The Eritreans paid 45,000 Ethiopian Birrs³³ and more to reach Mekelle, and an additional 45,000 ETB to get to Addis Ababa. J, my comrade in N-A, told me: “Serbi, everyone’s making money. If there’s someone you know, please introduce them to me. You’ll get 45,000 ETB from just one Eritrean. Imagine if you work with five of them. My plan is to transfer at least five Eritreans. Then I could start my own business.” Smuggling Eritrean migrants became a profitable business in the areas adjacent to Eritrea.

TPLF CADRES AND THE THOUGHTS OF TSADKAN

When the TDF reached North Shewa and took control of the militarily strategic Kara-Qorie, there were hot political discussions among the fighters at different levels. H-W, the top military commander, gathered all the members of the operational staff in our military camp and declared:

“The main goal of our struggle is to eliminate the Amhara elites. They have created an alliance with Shaabia to eliminate Tigrayans from the surface of the earth. To eliminate this Amhara political elite, we must first overwhelm the regime in Addis Ababa. If necessary, the TDF will continue its advance into the centre of Addis Ababa. At this moment, no power can prevent us from entering Addis Ababa. The strategic forces of the ENDF have been destroyed in previous battles and the rest of Abiy’s army is not well trained. They do not have the stamina or courage to fight the TDF. The main aim of this struggle is to ensure Tigray’s security for the next hundred years. But one thing you should all remember is that we do not want Ethiopia to collapse because of the TDF. If Ethiopia is to fail, it should be on its own and not because of the TDF.”

On September 14, 2021, I was having coffee with a member of the TPLF’s central committee. As I had discussed earlier with my comrades, I asked him his views on the future of Tigray: “Independence isn’t an option for Tigray”, he replied. “I personally don’t believe independence would be a solution for Tigray. Whether you’re convinced or not, this Tsadkanic³⁴ thinking would be a catastrophe for Tigray.” I realised from this conversation that there were ideological differences among our political and military leadership. General Tsadkan is one of the most honoured military leaders in the TDF and as far as I understand it he is in favour of unity with Ethiopia. He has clearly stated in various interviews and conferences that independence was not his preference for Tigray. I don’t understand why the TPLF cadres speak ill of him.

33. Approximately 1,500 euros at the time.

34. General Tsadkan Gebreterensae is a member of the TDF’s central command, and was the ENDF’s Chief of Staff during the 1990s and the 1998-2000 war against Eritrea. He was ousted from the TPLF during the 2001 splinter and became a businessman before taking a leadership position in the TDF.

“WHY ARE YOU KILLING ME? I AM YOUR COMRADE. PLEASE LEAVE ME”

During my two years in the TDF, I saw fighters being executed by direct order of their commanders. I don't remember the exact day, but I recall that the E-T division was involved in a guerilla battle. After hours of fighting, my friend told me that the enemy had pushed the E-T back. The commander, W-B, ordered an organised retreat. One new not well-trained recruit was trying to retreat. He was holding an RPG³⁵ but he failed to handle it properly, so he abandoned it and retreated. W-B heard about this and immediately ordered the fighter's execution, but no one wanted to execute him. A few days later, W-B saw that the fighter was still alive. “Why don't you execute him?” he asked. “I ordered you to. If you don't want to execute him, I'll do it.” The next day, a fighter shot that fighter three times in the chest. He was still breathing when he asked his fellow soldier: “Why are you killing me? I'm your comrade. I'm defending my people like you.” He eventually died.

The news reached all the fighters within hours, causing grief, even though nothing happened. After the TDF had retaken Mekelle, the executed fighter's family learned what had happened to their son. No fighter asked W-B why he had done it. W-B wasn't sent to prison; he was transferred to another post in the division command. The fighter's family is planning revenge.

YOU WORK WITH SHAABIA

After the TDF took control of Mekelle in June 2021, three divisions of Army 1 (Erdi Tigray, Adwa and Hakfen) led by M were deployed to the Adyabo front to deter Shaabia. I was at this Adyabo front, and like others, I'm responsible for all the wrongdoings. The divisions' infantry spy unit arrested civilians *en masse*, without any proper investigation.

On October 5 2021, the X division's spy unit held a man called H-A in A. H-A was from a small Saho-speaking Muslim community called the Asawerta, who live on the shores of the Mereb River. They arrested him with 11,000 Ethiopian birr and 3,000 Eritrea Nakfa in his pocket. The spy unit transferred him to the division (T) leaders in the nearby town for further investigation. Assuming he was from Eritrea, the T division commander D ordered his execution. With no investigation. His body was thrown on to the road. Everyone could see it, and it is still not clear why he was murdered.

35. Rocket-propelled grenade.

FORCED CONSCRIPTION

There was forced conscription in A. On February 15, 2022, a group of S-A *woreda* representatives arrived at the *kebele* office in A and called for an immediate *kebele* cabinet meeting. A comrade and I were invited to join the meeting. A representative of the *woreda* in A said "We have received a request from the senior leadership to recruit 150 people to join the TDF within a week." The chairman of the *kebele* replied that the community wasn't willing to let new young people enrol in military training again: "Society," he added, "has raised the issue that leaders and wealthy merchants didn't send their sons and daughters to war. Tigray is equal for all of us. Our community isn't interested in sending our sons and daughters off for military training. Tigray is equal for poor farmers, rich merchants and leaders. We will send our sons and daughters when the leaders and rich merchants do the same."

The *woreda* representative in the *kebele* insisted: "This is an urgent demand. We'll solve the problem you've raised next time." After hours of debate, the *kebele* chairman gave in. "People aren't willing to send their sons and daughters, so for now we'll try to send one person from each family." Everyone agreed on this idea. Later, the *woreda* representative and *kebele* chairman asked me and my comrade to help them collect all the adults from the village at the health centre, but we rejected the idea of additional mass recruitment. "We are here to gather information about Shaabia, not to conscript," my comrade told them. After some discussion we agreed, however, and we gathered all the adults from the village at the health centre. The recruited adults were then sent to the *woreda* in Isuzu cars, accompanied by militiamen.

There was conscription almost every month. Some people escaped from the car, some from the *woreda* office and some from the training centre. A team was sent to search for escaped trainees and bring them back. The conscription time was then changed from daytime to nighttime, considering that people hid in caves or close surroundings during the day. When there was a plan to take on new recruits, the *kebele* leaders would often leak the information to their relatives, so that all the residents found out and could hide and then return home at night. We began to conscript adults at night using teams led by the *kebele* leaders. Sometimes even we used force. We knocked on their doors at midnight and sent them to the *woreda*. They still returned within days. They had no faith in the *woreda* leaders or the struggle.

Families who didn't send a family member to the TDF were labelled as traitors. They were also supposed to provide extra supplies (cereal, meat, sheep, goats and money) to feed the TDF. The A area has huge reserves of gold. The rich gold merchants didn't send their children to TDF: they gave money to the *woreda* leaders and hid their sons in Shire, Aksum and Mekelle. If someone reported that Mr. X hadn't sent his son to the army, the wealthy merchants would say "I sent my son to the army. He's currently at a training centre. You can easily check with

the training centre.” The rich gold and cereal merchants’ children are alive, but the poor farmers are still waiting in hope for news of their sons and daughters.

WE ARE FIGHTING FOR YOU

I don’t remember the exact day, but I once travelled with some comrades to a place called M-F to gather information about Shaabia and a Tigrayan political opposition group called Tinsae Tigray³⁶. On our way, we found some adults digging gold. When they saw us, they ran away to hide. Two fast comrades caught two of them. Others left the gold site. Comrade B invited them to join us. “Why and where?” a boy asked. “We are TDF members fighting for you.” I didn’t expect this kind of response from B. The boy said “I respect the TDF but I’m sorry to say that you can’t claim you’re fighting for me. I have three brothers at the front with the TDF, like you.” “What are you doing in a place where Eritrean spies are operating?” B asked. The boy replied “I’m the only person supporting my family. Because my older brothers joined the TDF, I’m here digging gold and supporting my family.” B had no answer to this.

“Why do you say we are fighting for you?” I asked B. “Is this good for our image?” “I am suffering day and night,” he answered. “I spend nights in trenches. I don’t eat proper food, but they are living in comfort. I don’t know when I’m going to die, but they’re digging for gold. I feel bad.” “I didn’t expect this response from you, B”, I replied.

“This mustn’t happen again. Yes, we’re fighting to ensure the safety and security of Tigrayans. These boys are Tigrayans. The food we eat daily comes from their families. This is simply harassment. We aren’t here to harass our own people. If we harass them, how are we different from Shaabia? We aren’t here to change our lives, to feel comfortable. We’re in this area to protect these people from Shaabia.”

PAY YOUR DEBTS AT THE DEDEBIT MICROFINANCE OFFICE

On June 28, 2021, the TDF retook Mekelle and liberated most of Tigray. The government then passed an order for farmers to repay the debts they had incurred before the war to the Dede-bit microfinance office³⁷ at a 17% interest rate. Dede-bit microfinance assigned its workers to collect the money from the farmers. In every *kebele*, during church services or other social gatherings, Dede-bit workers forced

36. Tinsae Tigray is a group of Tigrayan militants opposing the regional government, supported and funded by the Eritrean government.

37. Regional micro-finance offices are in charge of providing loans for agricultural investment and to collect the debts farmers take on for the purchase of fertilisers. Dede-bit is the Tigray regional institution, the first to have been established in Ethiopia.

farmers to repay some or all of their debts. But the farmers weren't able to: all their property, including their cattle, had been taken by *Shaabia* during the first round of the war, and on top of that they had had to provide supplies to the TDF.

One day, a Dedebit official came to me and asked me to convince the farmers to repay their debts. "I'm here to fight the enemy, not to force, convince or confuse the farmers. That isn't my duty. How do you expect the farmers to pay ten thousand at this moment?", I answered. I had received information that farmers in other *woreda* were being imprisoned for not paying their debts. The government said "We are fighting for the Tigrayan farmers", but actually they were working against them. The government begged the farmers to provide cereals and other supplies and to send their sons off to war, but at the same time it was forcing them to pay off their debts, which most of them could not afford to do. This was one of the most tragic things I experienced during my time in the military.

ERITREAN FATHER AND SON

On November 16, 2021, I was in A. Nearby farmers brought me two Eritreans, a father and son, Kibrom and Nayzgi. They were from a town called M Nayzgi, who was 13, kept cattle near the Mereb River³⁸. "Are you a soldier?" I asked Kibrom "I'm an 8th round graduate from Sawa," he replied.

"I took part in the Ethio-Eritrea border conflict. Now I'm not a soldier. I keep cattle in Mereb. The cattle herders told me my cattle had crossed over into Tigray. While I was looking for my cattle the Tigrayan farmers caught me with my son. They told me to surrender and accused me of being a *Shaabia* soldier. I told them I'm a civilian; I'm not a soldier."

People from Eritrea and Tigray were afraid to cross the borders during the war. I received reports that Tigrayan cattle herders were being taken from Mereb by Eritrean soldiers. I asked the team leader to send Nayzgi back to Eritrea at night, but he disagreed, saying if we sent him back to Eritrea he might report our location and other military information to *Shaabia*.

In the morning, we sent Nayzgi and Kibrom to the prison in N. They were jailed for a week. The prison guards beat Kibrom, forcing him to admit he was a soldier. After a week in prison father and son were separated. Nayzgi was sent to a refugee camp, and Kibrom stayed in the N prison. Kibrom later admitted that he was a *Shaabia* soldier because he wanted to be moved to S prison. Father and son were separated in this way, not by their fault. This is one of the bad memories of my TDF career.

38. The river marking the border between Tigray and Eritrea.

Every Eritrean farmer, merchant or cattle-herder was considered to be a *Shaabia* soldier. The way the Eritreans were treated was inhumane. Everyone insulted them, calling them “Evil *Shaabia*”. Just as every Tigrayan isn’t TPLF, all Eritreans aren’t *Shaabia*. No one understands this plain fact. There was a mob-distorted feeling towards Eritreans.

I AM NOT POOR LIKE YOU

After the Pretoria Agreement, most of the top military leaders began their own businesses. The leaders forgot the fighters, and spent their time in luxury hotels in Mekelle with their families. The fighters began criticising the leaders in public. Our wounded comrades didn’t receive proper medicine and treatment, but the generals were celebrating their daughters’ and sons’ weddings. M’s daughter was married in a luxury hotel. There was whisky and other expensive drinks. The news reached K army fighters. Everyone was disappointed and the issue became public. M was very angry. “I don’t expect such public anxiety and such a negative reaction,” he told his comrades. “Even if I tried to stop them, my wife and daughter would not accept the idea. My daughter is paying for the whole thing herself. I’m not helping her. She works in an NGO and has more money.” Later on, he told some fighters “I, M, am not poor like you. I’m rich. I’m not short of money like you. I joined the struggle to save Tigray from our enemies, not to feed my stomach like you, you beggars.”

After the Pretoria Agreement, many fighters suffered from trauma, but the interim government still didn’t inform families about the whereabouts of our martyred fighters. I lost my older brother in 2021 at the battle of Yechila. I haven’t told his family to this day. His mother, wife and children are still expecting him to come home. I haven’t visited my family. If I go to see them, they’ll ask me about my brother, but how can I tell them? How can I lie to my mother? Because of all this fear, I haven’t seen my family. I know families who lost three sons in the war and are still waiting for them to return. But the leadership doesn’t care about this because they are with their families, celebrating their children’s weddings. Like me, there are a number of comrades who haven’t seen their families.

MILITARY RANK

In early 2022, there was a military rank placement among TDF staff members. The aim was to find out the level of the staff members with the intention of easily replacing military leaders during wartime. There were three selection criteria: 1. role in the 17-year armed struggle; 2. seniority; 3. effectiveness.

Most fighters disagreed with the first criterion, arguing that we hadn't been born then. The criteria were not inclusive, but the older veterans of the TPLF condemned us for taking this stand. They believed that we were undermining their role in the 17-year struggle. In fact, we weren't; we were just arguing that this criterion wasn't inclusive and that it would be better to replace it with another one. In the end, they allocated the higher ranks above vice division and core positions to the older veterans who had taken part in the 17-year TPLF struggle and the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war. In our army, I've never seen anybody from the new generation being given a rank above division commander. As a result, most TDF members were discontented.

In November 2023, the TPLF central committee launched a multi-month gimgema, a common type of self-evaluation meeting in state and party structures³⁹. The TDF's senior commanders were invited to join in and discuss the past and present challenges faced by the Tigrayan leadership. Middle-ranking officers were excluded. TDF soldiers are mobilised in military camps all across Tigray, but Wolkayt and Raya are still occupied territories ■

Serbi Netsanet

Résumé

Témoignage personnel d'un combattant des Forces de défense du Tigray

Ce texte retrace le parcours et l'expérience d'un jeune homme engagé comme combattant dans les Forces de défense du Tigray (TDF). Adoptant un point de vue subjectif et ancré, qui a rarement été publié, il renseigne sur l'intensité des combats, et décrit les souffrances et les restrictions subies par les soldats comme par les populations civiles. Il met également en lumière la crise politique interne au Tigray et révèle ses liens avec le déroulement du conflit au quotidien. Ce texte est un document original, il a été partiellement anonymisé par la rédaction et les événements qui nous ont semblé trop exposer l'auteur ont été reformulés entre crochets.

39. On the politics of *gimgema*, see M. Labzaé, "Gimgema: Civil Servants' Evaluation, Power and Ideology in EPRDF Ethiopia", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 15, n° 4, 2021, p. 546-567.